

Hell in Zoroastrian History

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Abstract

The present article surveys some relevant developments of conceptualizations of hell in the R̥g-Veda, the Avestan corpus and the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature of the Zoroastrians, where hell is more extensively discussed. The article concludes by looking at the belief in heaven and hell among the world-wide Zoroastrian diaspora communities, urban laity in Mumbai, and professional priests in Western India.

Keywords

Zoroastrianism, hell, eschatology, ethics, sins, priests

...*a-dānīh*... *čiyōn mahist parwānag ī ō dušox*
...ignorance... which (is) the greatest guide to hell
(*Zādspram* 30:38)

In his groundbreaking work *La philosophie de l'histoire* from 1765 the French enlightenment philosopher Voltaire challenged some main paradigms of established European historiography. Based on the idea of the principal unity and continuity of mankind, Voltaire replaced the idea of salvation history conceived as a pyramid with Judaeo-Christianity as the top with a more open structure, in which other cultures are assigned significant places. Their contributions to the civilization of mankind are sometimes emphasized as part of Voltaire's campaign against the church and other manifestations of *l'infâme*. For example, Voltaire claims that fundamental aspects of unspoiled religion had originated in the East a long time before they became part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Zoroastrianism is an important case in point. Having read a Persian Zoroastrian text in Latin translation (published in 1700), Voltaire writes:

... ces Parsis croyaient depuis longtemps un dieu, un diable, une résurrection, un paradis, un enfer. Ils sont les premiers, sans contredit, qui ont établi ces idées... (Voltaire 1969:127)

Thus, Voltaire claims that fundamental ideas such as god, devil, resurrection, paradise, and hell, which constitute something like the doctrinal kernel of Christianity, did in fact originate with Zoroastrianism.¹ The presumed impact of Zoroastrian theological ideas such as monotheism, dualism, angels, demons, eschatology, paradise, apocalypticism, and pollution on the Judaic-Christian traditions have been an important stimulus triggering the academic interest in Zoroastrianism. Nowadays, such claims abound in cyberspace, often based on older scholarly literature. The Oxford Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics, Robert Charles Zaehner (1913–1974), for example, writing in 1961, finds that “the similarities are so great and the historical context so neatly apposite that it would be carrying scepticism altogether too far to refuse to draw the obvious conclusion” (1961:57), namely that Christian concepts of rewards and punishment, heaven and hell, are dependent on Zoroastrian ideas. In his posthumously published work *Lux perpetua*, the Belgian historian of ancient religions Franz Cumont (1868–1947) pointed to what he considered to be quite pervasive Zoroastrian influences, mediated by the “Magians” of Western Asia,² on the transformation of the Greek concept of Hades (Cumont 1949:219–234). Among his strongest points of evidence he pointed to the role of demons as punishers in hell (which we will encounter below) and the idea of punishment by means of fire (which we, contrary to widely shared misconceptions do *not* find in Zoroastrian sources).³ In the present article, we will not discuss these theories or reconstructions. One of their inherent problems is that they often tend to stipulate a consistent Iranian or Zoroastrian framework. In the present article we will, on the contrary, try to historicize Zoroastrian conceptions

¹ See Stausberg 1998:901–46 for Voltaire’s views on Zoroaster.

² Most contemporary scholars no longer believe in the existence of this group (see Beck 1991; de Jong 1997).

³ Against (among others) Cumont, Tardieu (1985) points to Greek, Christian and other traces in one important Zoroastrian Middle Persian text, the *Ardā Vīrāz Nāmag*, which he regards as a storage basin of various religious ideas and traditions, enriched by some elements of Iranian provenience.

of hell by outlining their development through some major stages of Zoroastrian history.

I. Origins and Early Developments

Mary Boyce (1920–2006), the doyenne of Zoroastrian studies in the late 20th century, has voiced the opinion that Zoroaster was the first to develop a clear conception of an underworld “not merely of negations, but of punishment, in fact as hell” (1996[1975]:84). The *daēnuas*, the “debased” deities of the presumed pre-Zoroastrian “pagan” religion, became its principal “inhabitants, to be execrated by all true followers of the prophet” (ibid.).

Linear developments such as these, where a pre-Zoroastrian religion assumed to have been “reformed” by the “prophet” is reconstructed mainly on the basis of comparative Indo-Iranian philology, are problematic in theoretical and methodological respects (see e.g. Stausberg 2002a:115–17). A claim such as the one advanced by Boyce would be plausible only if it could be shown that there are no traces of hell-like conceptions in the Vedic, more precisely the early Vedic (= Rgvedic) hymns, the closest linguistic, poetic and to some (unclear) extent also historical cognates of the textual corpus known as the Avesta. Further evidence would then be necessary to substantiate such a claim.

1. *The Rg-Veda*

Let us therefore start by looking at the early Vedic evidence. Scholars of Vedic religion, most extensively Hermann Oldenberg (1923:536–42), have discussed some five passages that could at first sight appear to be relevant for a conceptualization of hell (RV II.29.6; VII.104; IX.73.8–9; X.14.10–11; X.152.4). There is a consensus in scholarship that most of these passages, some of which allude to people falling or being thrown into a pit, cannot be taken as proof of the existence of a fully developed conceptualization of hell (see e.g. Witzel and Gotō 2007:462; Oberlies 1998:473), especially in comparison with later developments in Indic religions (later Vedas, Buddhism, and Hinduism).

The main positive reference is book VII, hymn 104, verse 3:

*indrāsomā duṣkṛto vavre antaranārambhaṇe tāmasi prā vidhyatam /
yathā nātaḥ punarekaścanodayat tad vāmastu sahaṣe manyumacchavaḥ*

Indra and Soma, throw forth the evil-doers into the enclosure, into the anchorless darkness |

So that not one may ever get out of there, so may your fierce might prevail over them

It remains unclear (and also depends on one's concept of hell) whether the notion of an anchorless, dark enclosure into which evildoers are plunged by rightly wrathful deities can be meaningfully classified as a hell.⁴ Be that as it may, one needs to bear in mind that this last hymn of the seventh book appears to be an additional text, which, moreover, appears to have some unusual features. One is the use of the word *tāmas-* ("darkness"), which according to Stephanie Jamison (1991:267 n.227) is used only twice in the RV outside the passages pertaining to the villain Svarbhānu. The other passage is RV I.182.6, which refers to a son of Tugra who had been cast down into the waters and was "thrown forth into the anchorless darkness." Note that the darkness is here too characterized as "anchorless" (*anārambhané*). These are the only passages in the RV where the root *√vyadh* is used together with *prā*, yielding the literal meaning "to wound forth" (Jamison 1991:267 n.227). Thus, not only is the concept of a space vaguely reminiscent of a "hell" in RV VII.104.3 somewhat unique in the RV, but it is accompanied by unusual linguistic features which further indicate its marginal position. The verse describes an amorphous, dark place, which is located somewhere in the abyss below, some kind of enclosure (a dungeon or a pit) from which it seems impossible to escape, and into which evildoers are thrown so that the deities can torment them. Since this place has no proper name, it can be regarded as a hell *avant le lettre*.

2. The House of Lie in the Gāthās

Let us now turn to the *Gāthās*, presumably the earliest part of the Avestan corpus, often ascribed to its eponymous "founder," Zarathustra/Zoroaster (but see Stausberg 2007). A linguistic observation seems as a reasonable

⁴ Among Vedic scholars, Witzel and Gotō (2007:462) reject this verse as evidence for the notion of hell, while Oldenberg (1923:538) on the contrary finds it difficult to dismiss it as evidence.

starting point: the fact that *təmah-*, the Avestan equivalent to Vedic *tāmas-* (“darkness”), used in the passage discussed above (RV VII.104.3) to qualify the hell-like place, is attested twice in the *Gāthās*.

In Yasna 44, from the second *Gāthā*, the poet, identified by many as Zarathushtra, inquires of Ahura Mazdā which craftsman had fashioned the lights and the darkness (plural!) (Y. 44.5). In this context, the word does not appear to refer to a hell-like state. The second passage (Y. 31.20) is in the first *Gāthā*. It is one of those verses where translators are hopelessly at variance with each other. There is, however, a consensus that, in the second part, the executors of the Lie (*draguuantō*), the deceitful ones, are threatened because of their own actions with an extended stay in darkness (singular!), foul nourishment (food and drink), and the word “woe.” It seems that we are here encountering the notion of a separate space characterized by some extremely unpleasant features.

Foul nourishment (*duš.x^varəθa-*) is also mentioned in a verse of the short last *Gāthā* (Y. 53.6). It again appears in the accusative singular, apparently as something that the deceitful ones offer. Unfortunately, this verse seems even more obscure than Y. 31.20.⁵ Bad food (*akāiš x^varəθāiš*), here used in an instrumental plural, is also a key ingredient of the next verse to be considered in this context. This verse (Y. 49.11) from the third *Gāthā* appears less ambiguous. Humbach translates as follows:

But the deceitful of bad rule, bad action, bad word,
 of bad religious view, (and) bad thought:
 (the) souls come to meet (them) with foul food⁶
 (and) they will be welcome guests in the house of deceit.
 (Humbach 1991:182; see also Humbach and Ichaporia 1994:91)

Apparently, this verse speaks of the bad food that the souls (*uruuanō* = nominative plural) in an instrumental sense will present in the future to subjects whose achievements are bad. The verse continues by saying

⁵ See Kellens and Pirart (1991:270): “Les difficultés métriques et lexicales se combinent pour rendre cette strophe presque entièrement incompréhensible.”

⁶ Kellens and Pirart (1988:174) translate it as follows: “leur (propre) être leur fait tribu de mauvaises nourritures.”

that the souls will then be welcomed in the house of the Lie. Is that a proper noun for what may be classified as “hell”?

The House of Lie (*drūjō damāna-*) is mentioned in two other verses in the *Gāthās*. In one verse from the third *Gāthā* (Y. 46.11), we find it used in combination with the notion of the guest (*asti-*, Vedic *ātithi-*). The verse in question is one of the prime examples of early Zoroastrian individual eschatology. In Humbach’s translation it reads as follows:

Through (their) powers, the Karapans and Kavis yoke
a mortal one together with evil actions in order to destroy (his) existence
Their own soul and their own religious view will recoil from them
when they will have reached the place of the account-keeper’s bridge,⁷
(and they will remain) for all time guests (attached) to the house of deceit.
(Y. 46.11; Humbach1991:171 [see also Humbach and Ichaporia 1994:79])

The verse seems to be saying that the *karapan* and the *kauui*, the main categories of the religious adversaries of the in-group, are able to tie the mortals to bad actions so that, when they reach the point of decision over their future destiny, they will become guests of the house of deceit. While this house is not specified, it is made clear that being a guest in that house is an irreversible state — one remains there *yauuōi vīspāi*, literally for “all life-times.”

In a verse from the fourth *Gāthā* (Y. 51.14), the exact meaning of which is again rather obscure, the *karapan* themselves are singled out as ultimately ending up in the House of Lie. From the grammatical structure of the sentence it seems clear that it is because of their neglect of the orders of the Wise Lord and their dissociation from the Cow (and pasture), as well as because of their own acts and utterances, that they will reach the House of Lie (Y. 51.14). The following verse (Y. 51.15) shows that this House of Lie is constructed in correspondence with the House of Welcome (*garō damānē*), to which Ahura Mazdā goes first (Y. 51.15b). The verse also mentions the (eschatological) reward that Zarathushtra had assigned to the *magauuan*,⁸ the positive antagonists

⁷⁾ This is the *cinuuant- parəθu-*, a term which is variously interpreted and translated; see now Hintze (2000:258 n.39) who suggests the translation “Brücke des Büßers” (“bridge of the penitent”).

⁸⁾ On this verse, see Hintze 2000:142, 147, 159.

of the *karapan*, as Zarathushtra's allies. The House of Welcome is mentioned in two other verses, from which it appears that laudations are stored there (Y. 45.8) and that this is the place where the poet hopes to be heard (Y. 50.4).

What can we conclude from this admittedly brief analysis (one of the main weaknesses of which is that, for lack of space, it has to ignore the intra-textual contexts)? I think we can conclude that there is a pair of terms, the House of Welcome and the House of Lie respectively, which appear to be linked to the several protagonists of the unfolding conflict between Ahura Mazdā and his supporter(s) on the one hand and the Lie (*druj-*) and the powers of evil on the other. Thus, “heaven” and “hell” are here in the process of emerging as conceptual labels, while the R̥gvedic texts have not taken that step. Contrary to the Vedic verse quoted above, where the deities are exhorted to throw the villains into an amorphous space, the materials from the *Gāthā* consistently make it a point that it is their actions and other deliberately caused states of those affiliated with the Lie or their neglect of Ahura Mazdā that cause them to end up there. The poet exhorts the Wise Lord to see to it that this mechanism is effectuated, but Ahura Mazdā is not himself exhorted to put the deceitful ones in the House of Lie. From one verse (Y. 46.11) it seems that the deceitful ones will remain in the House of Lie forever. Darkness is only indirectly mentioned as a feature, but bad nourishment/food is a major characteristic. This can be linked to the concept of guesthood, for the guests in the House of Lie will enjoy a miserable form of hospitality. Moreover, contrary to the Vedic evidence, the House of Lie is clearly recognizable as an eschatological space.

These conclusions might tempt one to nominate Zoroaster, the alleged composer of the *Gāthās*, as the inventor of hell (see Boyce above). Such a conclusion only seems warranted to the detriment of neglecting the later Indian developments. However, already in the later Vedas the notion of hell seems to be well attested (see Oldenberg 1923:537). The assumption of a prophetic innovation or reform (which is something like a basic assumption of many reconstructions of early Zoroastrianism) is not a necessary precondition for the genesis of the conceptualizations of hell, nor does hell emerge only as a result of a dualistic cosmology. Instead of speculating on origins let us turn to later developments.

3. Terms for Hell or Hell-like States in the Younger/Standard Avesta

While we can observe the emergence, if not the full conceptual unfolding, of an explicit notion of a hell in the *Gāthās*, this “invention of hell” is not the point of departure for a direct line of development in the (supposedly) later textual traditions. For the neat pair of terms that we found in the *Gāthās* is not attested in the remaining, presumably later, Avestan corpus. Once, a “massive house of a deceitful one” (*sūrəm nmānəm druuatō*) is mentioned (Yt. 5.38), but the House of Lie is nowhere attested outside the *Gāthās*. However, the House of Welcome (in its Standard/Younger Avestan form as *garō.nmāna-*) is.⁹ Apparently, it has remained a standard name for “paradise.”

In general, the Avestan texts are not much concerned with “heaven” and “hell.” There are three closely interrelated terms referring to what we might call “hell” or “a hell-like state.” None of them occurs frequently. One is *ayhu-lahu- acišta-* (“the worst being/existence”). This form seems from the very term itself¹⁰ to be built on inferences from the *Gāthās*. In the penultimate section of the *Yasna*, Ahura Mazdā exhorts Zarathustra to pronounce the words that he (= Ahura Mazdā) had revealed to him (= Zarathustra) at the “ultimate turning point of life” (*ustəme uraaēse gaīiehe*) so that (by pronouncing these words) his soul will be kept away at a given distance from “the worst being/existence” (Y. 71.15). The “worst existence” thus appears to be conceptualized in spatial and eschatological terms, that is, a place it is possible to reach, but from which one rather keeps a distance.¹¹ While the *Yasna*

⁹ Bartholomae (1979[1904]:512–13) lists 8 occurrences of this word in the Standard/Younger Avestan corpus.

¹⁰ The words *ayhuš acištō* occur in conjunction in Y. 30.4 (b/c), but although both are in the nominative singular, recent translators such as Humbach and Kellens/Pirart, apparently for metrical reasons, separate the words in their translation. They do not translate them as “the worst being/existence,” but as “l’existence (de la) pire” (Kellens/Pirart 1988:111), making it appear as if *acištō* was a genitive, or they split the construction: “...and how his existence will be in the end. (The existence) of the deceitful will be very bad...” (Humbach/Ichaporía 1994:31).

¹¹ A Gāthic point of departure is Y. 51.6, which speaks of the “final turning point of existence,” apparently as a certain temporal moment, when the person who has failed to care for Ahura Mazdā will be assigned to “what is worse than bad,” something like hell, whereas the person who has the right relationship to Ahura Mazdā obtains “what is better than good.”

shows the recipient a way to avoid ending up in that place (by pronouncing the revealed words), the final verse of the long fifth chapter of the *Vendidad* threatens that one who disregards the laws of dealing with corpses will attain the existence of the executors of Lie (*ahūm... druuantəm*), the evildoers, an existence which is here qualified as dark, consisting of darkness,¹² and emanating from darkness, and which is referred to, possibly as a gloss (Bartholomae 1979 [1904]:109), as “the worst being/existence” (V. 5.62). The emphasis on darkness refers back to the *Gāthās*, and Y. 31.20c (mentioned above) is actually inserted into this verse. Here, however, the state of eschatological being is not clearly conceived in spatial metaphors.¹³

This verse is possibly copied from the final verse of the eighteenth chapter of the *Vendidad*, which states, in the context of a discussion of possible means to expiate the transgression of having sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman, that if one applies a pain (punishment) one will attain “the existence/being of the executors of Truthfulness/Righteousness” (*ahūm... yim ašaonəm*), whereas those who do not will attain that of the “executors of Lie” (*ahūm... yim druuantəm*). Here we encounter a clear parallelism between the rewards of the good and evil people respectively. The term *abu... druuantəm* (“existence of the executors of the Lie”) denotes a hell-like state of eschatological existence without any clear spatial characteristics.

The third Standard/Young Avestan term denoting something like “hell,” which also builds on the word *anhu-lahu-* (“being”; “existence”; “life”), but has no clear Gāthic antecedent, is *daožan’ha-*, literally “[place of] bad being/existence.” In two places it has the epithet *arəyant-*, likewise not attested in the *Gāthās*, meaning something like “tumultuous” (JamaspAsa/Humbach 1971:63; Hintze 1994a:233–34), “uproarious,” or “raging.” This adjective is also used twice to characterize flies (V. 7.2; 14.6). In the final verse of the 19th chapter of the *Vendidad*, after the demons have wondered how they might finish off Zarathustra, they recede to “the bottom of the dark being/existence, [to] the tumultuous hell” (V. 19.47). *daožan’ha-* is here indexed as a spatial category, the

¹² In Yt. 19.95 the Lie is qualified with the same term (*təmanhaēna-*).

¹³ Bartholomae had understood the verbal form *paθiiaite* to mean “hineingelangen” (obtain access to), which would suggest a spatial metaphor. Kellens (1984:20, n.1), however, has restored the reading to mean “disposer de” (possess).

habitat of the demons, characterized as deep and dark. In that sense it seems to correspond to a prototypical notion of hell (i.e. a familiar notion of hell primarily derived from the Christian tradition, then absorbed, enlarged and fine-tuned in scholarly contexts).¹⁴

After V. 3 and 18, this is the third chapter of the *Vendidād* which concludes with a reference to hell or something similar. “Hell” seems to be a *topos* in the rhetoric of this text. The probably best known Avestan reference to “hell,” however, occurs in a *Yāšt* (“hymn”), in a passage that describes the fights between the early heroes and their adversaries. According to this account, the great Avestan hero Kərəsāspa smashes an enemy with leaden jaws and hands of stones and who claims not yet to be of age. After coming of age, this Snāuuḍika makes the following boast:

I will lead down the Beneficial Spirit
From the luminous House of Welcome
I will make the Foul Spirit rush up
From the Tumultuous Hell.
They both shall pull my chariot,
The Beneficial and the Foul Spirit
Unless the manly-minded Kərəsāspa slays me. (Y. 19.44a-d)¹⁵

What we learn from this proclamation of hubris is that the “tumultuous hell” is the residence of the Foul Spirit, that his residence is below and that the Foul Spirit may rush up from it for his destructive exploits.

To conclude our survey of the Avestan corpus, we need to look at the *Hādōxt Nask*, which is an account of what will happen to the soul of the deceased. Just as the soul of the executor of Truth/Righteousness, the soul of the executor of Lie takes four steps into the other world. It inhales a foul-smelling wind. The three first steps are not described, but the fourth and final one leads the soul of the deceiver into the Infinite Darkness (plural!) (HN 2.33). This may vaguely remind us of the Gāthic passage referred to above (Y. 31.20), where the word, however, appears in the singular. In any case, the composite *anayra- təmah-* is a

¹⁴) Consulting main encyclopedias and dictionaries in religious studies, one finds astonishingly little conceptual effort spent on this term. For the purposes of this article, a discussion seems unnecessary.

¹⁵) For translations see Humbach/Ichaporla 1998:124; Hintze 1994a:232; Hintze 1994b:24; Skjærvø 2005:114.

hapax in the Avestan texts, and it may well have been reconstructed in analogy to the *anayra- raocā*, the Infinite Lights which are attested in this as well as in some other Avestan texts.

II. Developments of Hell in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) Literature

When proceeding to the Zoroastrian writings in Middle Persian, the so-called Pahlavi-literature, we need to recall that we are crossing a period of at least a millennium, or even more likely a millennium and a half, which separates the Middle Persian from the Avestan texts. One starting point is to look at the Middle Persian translations of the Avestan texts.

The Middle Persian version of *Hādōxt Nask* 2.27–33 literally translates *anayra- raocā* as *asar rōšnīg*, the Infinite Light. This compound remains a common term in the Pahlavi books as one of the names for heaven. Its opposite, *asar tārīkīh*, the Middle Persian form of *anayra- tāmāh-*, does not seem to have become a common word. In the Pahlavi texts, hell is mostly known as *dušox*, the Middle Persian form of the Avestan *daožay*"*ha*".¹⁶

Compared to the Avestan corpus, there is an abundance of textual sources on hell in the Middle Persian theological literature. The present analysis cannot claim to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Before turning to main features of the perception, or construction, of hell in the Pahlavi books from the Islamic Middle Ages (9th century onwards), it is important to look at the first clearly datable reference to hell.

1. The First Dated Occurrence: Kirdīr (3rd Century CE)

The first dated references to "hell" are found in one of the four inscriptions that the high priest Kirdīr had carved in stone in the late third century CE. Among historians of religion, Kirdīr is maybe best known for his opposition to Mani and as partly responsible for the latter's execution. In his inscriptions — the only major inscriptions not carved by a king! — Kirdīr recounts his remarkable career and his achievements in propagating and restructuring the Zoroastrian religion (see e.g. Stausberg 2002a:222–26). Interestingly, despite his wide-ranging

¹⁶ In the form *dozah* this word continues in New Persian as the one word of Persian origin used for "hell."

public claims, Kirdīr has been all but forgotten in the later Zoroastrian historical texts.

Two of Kirdīr's inscriptions, at Sar Mašhad and at Naqš-i Rostam, contain an account of a visit to the netherworld. In these accounts (which are preserved in a fragmentary state), the priest asks the gods to show him heaven and hell, and he is assured that their *dēn* ("religious consciousness") will lead (the souls of) the saved ones to heaven and (the soul of) the damned ones to hell. At the end, after his visit/vision, the priest proclaims that he has been reassured about the actual existence of heaven and hell (*dwšhw*) (§§ 22 and 35–37 in the currently accepted reconstruction [see Gignoux 1991]).¹⁷ The inscriptions provide no details about hell. Probably as part of a discourse aiming at providing legitimacy to his extensive claims for religious authority, Kirdīr communicates his vision of the other world, with heaven or hell as the final destinations of the (souls of the) departed.

2. *The Knowledge of Hell and the Cognitive Evaluation of the Present Situation*

Some Pahlavi writings regard heaven and hell as essential features of the Zoroastrian religion. One text, belonging to the genre of wisdom-literature, states, with reference to anonymous religious authorities of previous ages:

They held this too: Every man's duty is to know these five things; he who does not know them is under guilt. One is this: "What am I, a man or a demon?" One is this: "Where have I come from, from paradise or from hell?" One is this: "What do I stand by, by the things of the gods or by those of the demons?" One is this: "Whom do I follow, good people or wicked people?" One is this: "Where shall I go back, to paradise or to hell?" (Dk. VI 298 [= Shaked 1979:115])

Of course, all these questions have implications for the present. Heaven and hell, in particular, are basic points of cognitive reference for evaluating the present situation. One should always remember and fear hell:

¹⁷ Note that we are here dealing with a reconstruction. The word *dwšhw* is materially attested in KNRm 64 and KNRb 5; the remaining instances (KSM 28/KNrm 53; KSM 29; KSM 52) are emendations.

They held this too: Each man . . . should hold the things of the spirit in memory at every moment and time — both the goodness of paradise and the evil of hell. At a moment when comfort, good things and joy have accrued to him, he should think this: “It will indeed be good there in paradise, when even here it is so good. . . .” At a period when distress, grief, evil and pain have accrued to him, he should think this: “It will indeed be bad there in hell when it is so bad even here; when from the great goodness of Ohrmazd, with which there is no evil intermixed over there, it is (still) so bad here.” (Dk. VI 16 [= Shaked 1979:9])

Unlike the protological past and the eschatological end, the present situation is characterized by a mixture of the divine and the demonic, the pure and the impure, good and evil, joy and sorrow, peace and war. Focusing on paradise is an imaginary strategy aiming at a conscious cognitive un-mixing of the present, by extracting from the present mixture that which is good only. For hell, there is the inverse strategy: even the worst things one has to endure in this life pale in comparison to the un-mixed suffering one has to endure there.

Manuščihr, a ninth-century priest, explains that hell is so terrible precisely because evil there appears in such an un-mixed, that is, unmitigated, form that it has hardly any similarity with this world (Dd. 26.5 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:86–87]).

3. *Anticipating Hell*

Dēnkard VI narrates the story of two priests (*ērbad*) who carried firewood from a mountain on their backs. They were quite exhausted. Asked by a high-priest why they were doing that sort of work, they replied that they had heard that everybody had to undergo some discomfort created by Ahreman, either in this world, the visible/material existence, or in the other world, the invisible/conceptual/spiritual existence. So they preferred to experience their share of discomfort in this world, where they would still see the sun and the moon and obtain nourishment, medicine, and remedies, because the discomfort one had to suffer in the invisible world would be without the addition of any good thing (Dk. VI D 5 [= Shaked 1979:181–83]). Experiencing the hell-like qualities of this world is preferable to having the full share of it in the other world. This account seems to imply that the experience of hell, or hell-like experiences, cannot be avoided, but that suffering in this world can be tolerated since it is mitigated by the presence of some

good elements. In line with this approach, another passage from *Dēnkard* VI praises the man who, as far as possible, endures hell in the visible/material world (*dušox pad gētīg be barēd*) (Dk. VI 305 [= Shaked 1979:121]).

Accordingly, as Manuščihr argues, there is an inverse relationship between the troubles suffered by the good people in this world and the joy they experience in the other world, to such an extent that “fear of the pain and punishment of hell” actually makes people refrain from pleasures in this world and makes them more virtuous (Dd. 5.5 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:52–53]). Manuščihr also points to difficulties in cognitively anticipating the reality of hell. For according to him hell is different from other things since in the case of hell the real thing is worse than what one fears it might be, whereas “the fear of every other thing is more than the thing itself” (Dd. 26,8 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:88–89]). Another Pahlavi text names the lack of “fear of hell” (*bīm az dušox*) as a sign of the catastrophic state of things at the end of the millennium (ZWY 4.40 [= Cereti 1995:138, 155]).

While these texts recommend the fear of hell as an attitude towards this world, this position was not unanimously shared. There is one text which explicitly advises that one should not focus one’s thoughts strongly on hell since there is expiation for every sin in the Zoroastrian religion.¹⁸ One should not consider anybody as “without hope of heaven” (ŠnŠ 12.28 [= Kotwal 1969:36–37]).

4. *Strategies of Hell-Avoidance*

In line with the strategy of exposing oneself to hell-like experiences in order to avoid hell and the emphasis on the positive, but difficult task of fearing hell, several writings advise their readers to actively take precautions so as not to end up in hell. This is indicated by the expression not to “reject the soul,” or, in positive terms, to do things “for the sake of the soul” (see Shaked 1990).

In the Pahlavi translation of an Avestan text one finds the gloss that there are things that “save one’s soul from hell” (*ruwān az dušox... bōxtan*) (Ner. II 66.4 [= Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 2003:280–81]). At

¹⁸) This statement is legitimated by a quotation from the *Gāthās* (Y. 32.7).

least according to the priestly point of view mirrored in this text, this must be the main preoccupation of the faithful.

Apart from doing good things and avoiding evil ones, another strategy was to do repentance:

They held this too: From repentance there is no way to hell. (Dk. VI 50 [= Shaked 1979:19]).

Accordingly, the long formulaic texts of repentance, the so-called *Patī*, which are recited in ritual contexts, invariably contain the performative statement that repentance has been spoken by the believer either “from the great dread of hell” (PP I and II 12.3 [= Dhabhar 1963:120, 147]) or for “shutting the way to hell and for opening the way to paradise” (XP 13 [= Dhabhar 1963:156]). Only by submitting his body and his possessions to the chiefs, by repenting mentally and by the chiefs absolving him, will the one who has committed deadly sins (*marg-arzān*) be saved from hell (ŠnŠ 8.5 [Tavadia 1930:105–6]). If no repentance is made, the sinner will unavoidably go to hell (ŠnŠ 8.7 [Tavadia 1930:106]).

The main concern of the Zoroastrian texts is of course that Zoroastrians should be saved from hell. This, however, does not automatically imply that all non-Zoroastrians invariably end up in hell. A ritualistic treatise quotes one authority as having stated that a non-Zoroastrian (*ag-dēn*, literally “of evil religion”) saves himself from hell if he does merely one good deed more than bad ones (ŠnŠ 6.5 [Tavadia 1930:97]).¹⁹

The easiest way to avoid hell, of course, is to accumulate more good thoughts, words or deeds than bad. Some virtues, however, are praised as particularly efficient to avoid hell.²⁰ A catechism highlights gratefulness (ČHP 30 [= Kanga 1960:16–17]). This virtue is also praised in the wisdom literature as a way to save one’s soul (Dk. VI 120; E38c; E45f [= Shaked 1979:48–49; 206–7; 214–15]), sometimes in conjunction with other virtues such as contentment and tenderness. Generosity is also

¹⁹ Since this opinion is presented as that of one authority (whose name is given), one might surmise that it was not generally shared.

²⁰ Likewise there are some sins that immediately lead to hell, such as performing worship while thinking that the gods do not exist (Dk. VI D1b [= Shaked 1979:176–77]), standing when urinating (MX 1.39 [Skjærvø 2005:242]), or ignorance, bad knowledge and lack of wisdom (WZ 30.38–39 [= Gignoux and Tafazzoli 1993:104–7]).

emphasized as saving the soul from hell (Dk. IX 6.3 [see West 1892:179]), as is righteousness (Dk. IX 17.3 [see West 1892:204]).

The *Pahlavi Rivayāt Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, probably from the late 9th or early 10th century, emphasizes the practice of next-of-kin marriage (*xwēdōdah*) as a way to salvation (or rescue) from hell (*bōxtišn az dušox*), even in case of the most grievous sins (PRDd. 8b1 [= Williams 1990:11]). The practice of next-of-kin marriage rescues one from hell, which is referred to as “the prison of Ahreman and the demons” (PRDd. 8b3 [= Williams 1990:11]). The emphasis on the “miraculous” character of this practice possibly correlates with difficulties in implementing the practice.

5. *The Temporal Limitations of Hell*

In the *Gāthās* we have seen that the “souls” and “religious views” of the condemned remain in the House of Lie “for all times” (Y. 46.11; see I.2. above). The Pahlavi sources, however, consistently emphasize that hell will be destroyed during the eschatological transfiguration of the world, which implies that the souls of the sinners will be released from hell at that time (see e.g. Dd. 31.8; 40.4; Dk. IX 17.6).²¹ Even the inhabitants of hell are aware of the fact that their suffering will end after 9,000 years at the latest, although they hardly derive any consolation from that knowledge in their present tribulations (AVN 54.6).

At the end of time, however, after the general resurrection but before Ahreman and the demons are conquered and hell is abolished, mankind will again be reckoned, and, much to the dismay of their friends and family, all sinners (who lament to their relatives that they should have warned them about the terrible fate they are now suffering)²² will be forcefully put back into hell for a period of renewed suffering lasting three nights (Bd. 34.13–15; WZ 35.40–47;²³ ŠnŠ 8.7 [empha-

²¹) Zaehner 1976:132 puts it quite philosophically: “No man is punished eternally for sins committed in time.” No such reasoning is provided by the sources.

²²) The moral appeal of this scene is evident.

²³) Zādspram narrates an episode describing how the righteous will be separated from the sinners: a great fire (here apparently to be understood as a divine agent) comes from the endless light, filling the air with light. The fire carries what looks like the trunk of a tree with branches at the top and roots below. There is one branch and one root for each sinner and righteous soul respectively. A divinity or a demon passes the

sizing the severe punishments to be suffered for grievous sins]; Dd. 31.10 [purification by “washing with molten metal”]). Then, according to Zādspram, they are released by the divine agent Ērman (av. Airiïaman) (WZ 35.49).²⁴

According to the *Bundahišn* (*Foundational Creation*), the Fire (here apparently understood as a divine agent), together with Ērman, will melt the metals in the hills and mountains, causing them to flow over the earth like a river. All have to pass through this stream of molten metal, and thus they will be purified, but while this is a pleasant experience for the righteous, for the sinners it will be exactly like walking through molten metal (Bd. 34.18–19).²⁵ This collective purification is followed by a state of mutual love and friendship (Bd. 34.20).

According to another source, the *Dēnkard*, this final purification is part of the suffering which the souls undergo in hell. As a result they will be purified from their contamination of sin and will be “again clothed in a garment of the same substance, and they enjoy perfect bliss eternally and without interruption” (Dk. III 272 [= Zaehner 1972:262; see de Menasce 1973:273]). The high-priest Manuščihr says that they become “righteous, pain-free, immortal, fearless, and free from evil” (Dd. 31.11 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:102–3]).

According to the *Bundahišn*, at the eschatological transfiguration of the world, not only will the sinners be purified and released,²⁶ but hell itself will be purified by the stream of molten metal, and its stench and filth will be burnt by the molten metal (not directly by the fire!) and then it will become clean (Bd. 34.31). The part of the world where hell was located will then be joined with the remaining extension of the world (Bd. 34.32). These statements lead us to the question of the topography of hell.

branch or the root to the righteous and the sinners. In this way the two groups are separated (WZ 35.40). Note that the fire is here a divine actor carrying the trunk and lightening up the scene. It should not be confused with a cosmic fire.

²⁴ WZ 30.51 in passing uses the metaphor of prison for hell.²⁴⁾

²⁵ Note that this does not amount to a cosmic fire; the Fire is merely required to melt the metal (which is the purifying agent here).

²⁶ Zaehner 1976:132 argues that this aspect of hell makes it similar to a purgatory.

6. The Topography and Ecology of Hell

Since the avoidance of hell was recommended as a constant mental preoccupation, it is only natural that the question arose as to what hell might be like. After all, if one is required to have something permanently on one's mind, one needs to have some idea of what it is.²⁷

In the late 9th century, questions about the nature of hell, its punishments, pain and discomforts, as well as the food served there, were apparently posed to the high-priest Manuščihr and he replied to them in his book *Religious Judgements* (*Dādestān ī dēnīg*) (Dd.). Here is a brief summary of the information provided by Manuščihr, synoptically collated with and supplemented by information provided by some other texts such as the “anthology” of Manuščihr's brother Zādspram (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram*) (WZ), the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (*Book of the Righteous Virāz*) (AVN), the *Dādestān ī mēnōg ī xrad* (*Judgements of the Spirit of Wisdom*) (MX), the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (ZWY), the fifth book of the *Dēnkard* (Dk.), and the *Bundahišn* (*Foundational Creation*) (Bd.). Most descriptors (i.e. terms describing the location) of hell hyperbolize in the extreme negative aspects of ordinary life.²⁸ Some descriptors appear predictable in theological, classificatory and cognitive terms. The extreme phenomena are all a means to express the supposed suffering of the souls of the sinners.

To begin with, Manuščihr provides the following concise description: “it is below, deep, and underground, most dark, most fetid, and most terrible, most unwanted, and worst, the place and the dwelling of demons and she-demons” (Dd. 26.2 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:86–87]).²⁹ Hell is filthy (Dd. 26.4; MX 1.119).³⁰ Apart from demons and

²⁷ The available information is also summarized (but organized differently) in the entries “Dūzak” (M. Shaki) and “Hell. I. In Zoroastrianism” (Ph. Gignoux) in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (available online at www.iranica.com); see also Gignoux 1968.

²⁸ The descriptors are therefore not counter-intuitive in the sense of the term established by cognitive approaches to the study of religion (i.e. as violating ontological categories).

²⁹ Among the many demons inhabiting hell, slander (*spazgih*) is unique: it is such a grievous sin that the slander-demon moves backward, while all other move forward (MX 2.8–12).

³⁰ From a Douglasian point of view this is to be expected, for dirt is matter out of place, and hell is a place where the divine order is absent.

she-demons, hell is also the abode of sorcerers and witches (WZ 7.28; ZWY 3.27). It also houses the noxious animals (*xraftar*), creatures of Ahreman; in hell even small noxious animals appear big as mountains (AVN 18.8).

Hell is regarded as Ahreman's residence or prison (ZWY 3.23; Bd. 4.27; Bd. 6j.0; PRDd. 8b3). In *illo tempore* Ahreman had pierced a hole into the good creation, and hell is located at the spot, in the middle of the earth, where the Foul Spirit had pierced the earth "like a snake coming out of its hole" (WZ 2.5; Bd. 4.28). Ahreman and the demons strive to escape hell in order to create chaos in the world, but they are sometimes cast back into hell — as after the appearance of Zarathustra on the cosmic scene (WZ 10.19), or by performing certain rituals (Dk. IX 14.2: the demons rush forward from hell in order to cause destruction, but by performing the *drōn* they are pushed back [see West 1892:197]).

The topography of hell is not entirely consistent. It may be located in the middle of the earth as well in the north (Dd. 31.6), the direction of Ahreman and all evil agents.

Hell is either icy or terribly hot (MX 6.27). The *Bundahišn* explains both phenomena by the connection of hell to the planets (Bd. 26.54).

Hell is deep down (Dd. 32.6), like a pit (*čāh*) (AVN 18.3; 54.2).³¹ The *Bundahišn* constructs a homology between hell and the anus (Bd. 28.10 [see Lincoln 2007:92]). Some texts state that it is underneath the earth (Dd. 31.6; WZ 35.22; Dk. V 8.2). Some sources connect it to a specific locality in the sacred geography, namely the Arzūr-ridge, also known as the head or neck of Arzūr, a mountain top famous for being the gathering place of the demons *par preference* (Dd. 32.6). Beside Manuščihr, several texts mention that there is a door to hell on this mountain top (Dd. 32.6; *Pahlavi Vendidad* 3.7; PRDd. 50.1; Bd. 9.10; ŠnŠ 13.19; see also Dk. IX 20.2).

Hell is located underneath the bridge leading to the upper regions of the other world (Bd. 30.3). Manuščihr explains that the soul of the

³¹) Dk. V 24.30a (see Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000:104–5) notes that, "those who are knowledgeable about the religion don't fall blindly into the pit of the wicked" (*čāh ī druwandān* — which seems to refer to hell). This goes against the assumption that the metaphor of the pit has been adapted from the *Apocalypse of Paul* (where the Greek word φρέαρ is used); see Tardieu 1985:21.

wicked, after the account has been made, “topples head first from the Cinwad bridge and falls down” (Dd. 31.2 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 98–99]). While the *Bundahišn* states that the soul falls right into hell (Bd. 30.25, 31 [Skjærvø 2005:203]), *Manuščihr* provides a somewhat different account: once fallen down, the soul is “oppressively fettered” and conducted to hell by a demon (Dd. 31.3 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:98–99]). The *Dādestān ī mēnōg ī xrad* presents yet another account: here the demon already fetters the soul beforehand in order to make it proceed to the bridge, and then, maltreating it and ignoring its suffering, crying, and pleading, eventually drags it down into hell (MX 1.103–7 [= Zaehner 1976:136]). *Zādspram*, on the other hand, states that the soul proceeds to hell alone, as if captured by enemies (WZ 30.44 [= Gignoux and Tafazzoli 1993:106–7]).³²

In hell the lonely soul experiences emotions such as pain, torture, sorrow, grief, fear, trouble, and unhappiness. There is no pleasure and delight. Hell is full of evil (Dk. V 8.2; IX 20.2).

Hell is very narrow (AVN 18.3, 5; Dk. V 8.2). This trait is typically connected to other forms of sensual effects: hell is characterized by complete darkness³³ and a horrible stench³⁴ (AVN 18.4; Dk. V 8.2; MX 6.29). The darkness is metaphorically described as so thick that one feels that one can grasp it with one’s hands (AVN 18.4; Bd. 27.53; MX 6.31). Similarly, it feels as if one can cut the stench with a knife (Bd. 27.53).

This state of spatial oppression and sensory deprivation affects the perception of time. It seems to the souls that time passes much more

³² One Middle Persian catechism has a different account of how sinners are transported down to hell. According to this text, known as *Čīdag handarz ī pōryōtkēšān* (*Selected Advice of the Ancient Authorities*), the demon of dismemberment casts an invisible rope around the neck of each person during the parents’ sexual intercourse. One cannot remove that rope, but after death the rope falls from the neck of the righteous, whereas the demon uses that rope to drag the sinners into hell (§§ 31–32; see Kanga 1960:16, 25; Zaehner 1976:24).

³³ The darkness not only obscures light but even prevents the fire from emitting its good smell (AVN 54.3); ZWY 3.23, 27; 7.35 speaks of “darkness and obscurity” (*tār [ud] tom*).

³⁴ This feature corresponds to the primary metaphor “bad is stinky” (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999:50). The “embodied mind” approach might provide explanations for many metaphors for hell.

slowly (AVN 18.7; 54.6). Spatial oppression, sensory deprivation and all the suffering and pain they endure in hell create for the souls a dominant perception of loneliness, which contrasts with the actual overcrowding of hell. The loneliness is “very bad” (Bd. 27.53). The souls cannot hear the cries of their fellow residents in hell, and all think that they are all alone (AVN 54.4–5). Hell is the most unsocial place imaginable.

Even in hell people need food.³⁵ However, as Manuščihir points out, the fetid, rotten, polluted, and unpleasant food served in hell is not eaten with delight, but out of sheer need (Dd. 31.6). The food of hell does not satiate and gives no satisfaction (Dd. 31.6–7). This is another example of the subtraction of all beneficial aspects of ordinary activities in hell. It goes without saying that in heaven, eating is a pure pleasure and the best food imaginable is served. According to one text, Ahreman, the host of hell as it were, exhorts the demons not to treat the hell-dwellers well, but to “serve him (rather) with the filthiest and most foul food that Hell can produce.” Accordingly, the demons serve him “poison and venom, snakes and scorpions and other noxious reptiles (that flourish) in Hell, and they serve him with these to eat” (MX 119–20 [= Zaehner 1976:138]). In the normal order of things, these beings should be killed by the faithful and not under any circumstances be eaten. Hell is a place where the system of purity works in an inverted form. The theme of food links the Middle Persian accounts of hell with the *Gāthās*. It seems that this is because of the dominant social interactional pattern of hospitality, where food and the exchange of gifts play a major part.

7. *Different Sections of Hell*

Just as there are several sections of heaven, some texts point out that hell consists of several parts. According to one account, the soul of the deceitful person takes four steps, the fourth of which leads to hell itself

³⁵ From a cognitive point of view, this is an example of Jesse Bering’s experimentally tested observation that “those states with which people conceptually should have the most difficulty imagining the complete absence of (i.e., epistemic, emotional, and desire states) are attributed to dead agents much more readily than are those states which are frequently absent from our everyday phenomenological reserve (i.e., psychological and perceptual states)” (Bering 2002:288). Apart from cognitive constraints, only the continuation of basic phenomena of life makes hell rhetorically function as a mirror to evaluate the present.

(AVN 17.20) or to the innermost hell, the dwelling-place of Ahreman and the demons (MX 1.116).

Manuščihr presents his readers with a different infernography. According to his *Religious Judgements*, hell consists of three directions, or of “three places,” which “together are called hell” (Dd. 32.6). Interestingly, he reckons the *hamēstagān* as one of them. Elsewhere the *hamēstagān* is defined as the place where the souls are placed of those who end up neither in paradise nor hell because they have an equal share of sins and merits (e.g. AVN 6.3; PhIRDd. 65.2). Manuščihr, however, divides the *hamēstagān* into two parts, one for the righteous, and one for the deceitful, the latter being the first section of hell, which is dark and fetid and full of evil (Dd. 32.3). The second section of hell is the “worst existence” (*wattom axwān*), the abode of the demons, full of evil and torture (Dd. 32.4). The third section he calls *druzaskān*. Actually, the word is the Middle Persian form of an Avestan word which occurs once in the *Vendidād*, where the power of the divine agent Sraoša is praised, who is requested to strike a demon so that he will end up in the *drujas.kanā-* (V. 19.41). That word, it seems, has never gained wider currency, but Manuščihr employs that textual heritage for his construction of a tripartite infernography. He qualifies the *druzaskān* as “the bottom of the house of darkness, where the head of the demons runs” (Dd. 32.5). Our available sources do not permit us to decide whether this tripartite division was generally known, or whether it was merely an intellectual exercise by a learned theologian, articulated maybe in order to negotiate different concepts of hell.

Be that as it may, another division of hell appears in the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (*The Book of the Righteous Virāz*). No less than 84 of the 101 chapters (according to the standard modern editions) of this text deal with hell; it is the most detailed description of the other world available in Zoroastrian literature. Given its textual history and various translations, it is also one of the most popular religious writings of the Zoroastrians. The work is impossible to date with any amount of accuracy. The text reports a controlled ritual experiment conducted under the supervision of priests. Different versions of the text place the account in different periods of the past (see Gheiby 2004). As a result of this ritual experiment the soul of the righteous Virāz leaves his body and proceeds to explore the other world in order to dispel the doubts about

the efficacy of the rituals with respect to the other world. Under the guidance of two spiritual beings (Srōš and Ādur or Srōš and Ardwahišt [see Gheiby 2004:95]), Virāz sees the deities and the empty throne of Ahura Mazdā, before being shown around in heaven and hell. His first entry to hell is from the Činwad bridge. Having made a first tour through hell, Virāz is led back, and underneath the Činwad bridge, in the middle of a desert, he is shown the “hell in the earth” (AVN 53.1), from where he hears the complaints and cries from Ahreman, the demons, evil creatures, and the souls of the deceitful (AVN 53.2). So apparently there are two hells, and Virāz proceeds to visit the inner one as well. The general description of this inner hell is not really different from the regular one. Apart from the attributes “dangerous” and fearful” (AVN 54.2), it shares the characteristics of the regular hell, including the loneliness of the sufferers who are not aware of the presence of the many others who, closely packed together, are as many as “a number of the hairs of the mane of a horse” (AWN 54.4 [= Vahman 1986:208]).

Opinions vary on the interpretation of the duplication of hell. Michel Tardieu thinks that the distinction has been borrowed from Christian apocalyptic traditions, in particular the *Apocalypse of Paul* (Tardieu 1985: 22–23), while others see it as a sign of inconsistency resulting from successive and disorganized adaptations (Gignoux 1984:16), or as a result of a process of redaction (Gheiby 2004). Claudia Leurini (2002:216) has argued that there is “some specific regularity” in the distinction between the two hells, but I find her statistical analysis of the frequency and distribution of sins, sinners, and punishments not so compelling that chance distributions are ruled out sufficiently. At this stage I tend to concur with the idea that the redactors have tried to accommodate the idea of a hell inside the earth, as contained in other sources, and to find a place for it in their account. Besides looking for antecedents, one might also consider its communicative function: the distinction may well have served as a literary strategy to catch, or to sustain, attention, amidst the listing of all the sins and their correlating punishments.

8. *Agents and Main Forms of Punishment*

Hell is the dwelling-place of Ahreman, the demons, and the sinners. In the scenario of hell drawn by the *Ardā Virāz Nāmag*, the demons occasionally

serve as assistants for effectuating the severe punishments that the sinners are undergoing. They are pounding, beating, tearing and raking the souls of the sinners. Consonant with the Ahremanic ontology, the theologian Manuščihr remarks that the demons are made strong and powerful by the sins committed by the people; and they torment the sinners to the same extent that they have been empowered by them in the first place (Dd. 31.5). Ultimately, it is only human sin that empowers hell. Especially on those who have committed mortal sins, Manuščihr states, the demons inflict “pain and trouble and devouring and many kinds of stench, and biting and tearing and producing of all evil and discomfort” (Dd. 40.4 [= Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998:170–71]).

Other agents of punishments beside the demons are beasts that devour people. In fact, this is the most common type of punishment. In most cases, however, the agents of punishment are not specified. They are simply referred to as “they.”

As Leurini has calculated, the other most popular types of punishments are ingestion of impure materials, the cutting off of the tongue and hanging by the feet. Desperate weeping, moaning and crying are often mentioned (Leurini 2002:312).

Even if hell appears as quite a gruesome place, the Zoroastrian texts emphasize that the principles of justice and right measure are safeguarded even in hell.

Hell is the place where the sinners — that is, those whose sins outnumber their virtues — will be placed after death. The reckoning of sins and virtues is done in such a way that justice is safeguarded. Justice also prevails in hell, for the divine agent Ašwahišt is allotted the task of supervising that the demons do not inflict greater punishment on the sinners than is their due (Bd. 26.35). The principle of divine justice and righteousness — embodied by Ašwahišt — prevails even in hell, the Ahremanic sphere par excellence, and the demons are prevented from acting in an arbitrary fashion. Even hell is encapsulated within the cosmic order — just as Ahreman’s existence is encapsulated within the time frame set for the cosmic conflict. Accordingly, the *Bundahišn* continues by saying that everybody will eventually reach paradise (Bd. 26.37).

9. *The (Dis)order of Sins*

The *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* describes the suffering inflicted for specific sins.³⁶ It is unclear whether the description implies that each person is punished for a single, main offence committed, or whether one has to

³⁶ These are the sins, some of which are dealt with in more than one chapter (chapter numbers in parenthesis; + refers to cases where the sinner is gendered as male, * refers to cases where the sinner is gendered as female, indicating prevailing gender roles and stereotypes): +sodomy (19); *approaching water and fire during menstruation (20); +homicide (21); +sexual intercourse during menstruation (22); +eating without ritual precautions (23); *adultery (24); walking with one shoe only (25); *disrespect of husband (26); +cheating with measures in commercial transactions (27); +bad rule (28); +slander and instigating conflict (29); +illegal (= unritualized) slaughter of animals (30); +amassing and retaining wealth (31); +laziness/idleness (32) (in this chapter, the sinner is not presented anonymously, but the text refers to “Davāns who... never performed a good deed, but with his right food he threw a bundle of grass in front of a ploughing ox” [Vahman 1986:205]); +lying (33); *throwing hairs into fire while combing (34); *sorcery (35); +heresy (36); neglecting water and fire (37); +polluting water and fire through excrement and carrion (38); +withholding wages (39); +speaking falsehoods (40); +polluting public bathhouses (41); +fathers denying their legitimate offspring (42); +fathers denying their offspring (43); *abortion (44); +false testimony and extortion (45); +acquisition of wealth by stealing the property of others (46); heretics (47); +maltreatment of dogs (48); +false measurement of land (49); +removal of boundary stones (50); +making false promises (51); +violation of contracts (52); extinguishing sacred fires, destroying bridges, and other sins (55); rejection of gods and religion (56); *keen (57); +washing in (and thereby polluting) lakes or springs (58); *neglecting crying and hungry children (59); +adultery (60); religious doubt [including doubting the evil of hell!] (61); *despising one’s husband (62); *quarrelling with and backtalk to one’s husband (63); *adultery and subsequent abortion (64); disrespect for one’s parents (65); slander (66); +misbehaviour of a governor (67); *adultery (69); *abandoning one’s husband (70); +sodomy and adultery (71); *neglecting menstrual restrictions (72); *using cosmetics and hair of others (73); illegal (= unritualized) slaughter of animals (74); not giving water to farm animals (75); *preparing and serving food during menstruation (76); overburdening of cattle (77); *denial of pregnancy and abortion (78); +taking bribes and false justice (79), selling items with false measures and weights (80); *prostitution and sorcery (81); *tartness with regard to the husband (82); *concealing of meat from husband (83); *poisoning of men (84); *adultery (85); *violation of next-of-kin-marriage (86); *not giving milk to one’s child (87); *adultery (88); lack of benevolence (89); lying (90); +false judgments (91); envy and retaining benefits (92); denying hospitality to travellers (93); *not nursing and thereby killing one’s child and selling one’s milk to other (94); *leaving one’s baby hungry and thirsty and adultery (95); +not sowing the earth (96); lying (97);

undergo successively all the various forms of punishments corresponding to each and every sin committed. The text is obviously not interested in such theological intricacies, but rather wants to make an impression and inspire fear. The punishments suffered by the damned are often physically linked to the kind of sin they have committed.³⁷ This entails an anthropomorphization of the shape of the soul (i.e. the soul has a body).³⁸ The soul of the liar, for example, is punished with having worms gnaw its tongue (AVN 33), and the soul of a woman who has not paid respect to the menstrual taboos is forced to swallow bowls of filth and excrement (AVN 20).³⁹ In communicative and rhetorical terms this helps readers (or listeners) to imagine the expected punishments when reflecting on their own past and future actions.

Already the earliest editors and translators of the text were puzzled by the apparent disorder of the sins as they are depicted.

Regarding the arrangement of the crimes and offences mentioned, there is nowhere any system, or plan, perceptible. All are thrown together, the most heinous crimes may be followed by trifling offences. Several crimes and offences are mentioned more than once, for instance adultery... infanticide..., nursing other children...; but each time the wording is different as well as the punishment. (Haug and West 1971[1872]:lxix)

eating corpses and killing beavers (98); disobedience to rulers and hostility to army (99).

³⁷ Tardieu (1985:23–24) regards this strategy as a legacy of Greek traditions.

³⁸ According to Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts, man is composed of various mental (spiritual/conceptual) faculties, among them the soul (*ruwān*). The death of a person entails that the soul (together with other mental faculties) is separated from the body (*tan*). Being a mental faculty, the soul is linked to a body (and the separation from it causes terror to the soul), but the soul as such does not have a bodily shape. In the narrative (as told by the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*) about the pain inflicted upon the souls by the demons, however, the souls are presented in bodily shape, and the pains can only be effectuated on the bodies of the soul. In cognitive approaches to the study of religions, these inconsistent ways of defining/imagining the ontology and actions of agents is referred to as theological incorrectness (see Barrett 1999; Slone 2004).

³⁹ The *Dēnkard* witnesses another strategy, when it states that the contract-breakers are assigned to “the bottom of hell” (Dk. IX 20), where the souls are not punished physically but are placed in a particularly uncomfortable section of hell. (Reference kindly provided by Yuhān Vevāina.)

Haug and West are content with stating these facts, without attempting an explanation. The Iranian independent scholar Bijan Gheiby has recently come up with an ingenious explanation for the apparent chaos. He finds that “any attempt at introducing order and arrangement into hell seems superfluous” because Ahreman’s creation is defined as fundamentally chaotic, “not planned or methodically constructed” (2004:96). Unfortunately, however, this principle is never mentioned in the list of common attributes of hell. It also is in contradiction with the limits set by Ašwahišt on the punishments inflicted by the demons, implying, as pointed out above, that even hell is ultimately under divine control. Rather than chaos, hell appears as a perverse order. Gheiby’s idea therefore remains somewhat speculative.

There may be other reasons (no less speculative, to be sure). To begin with, the reduplications may well have to do with the long redaction history of the text. Obviously, this hypothesis does not dissolve the question of inconsistency, but merely moves it up one level, as it were. Not the authors, but the redactors and editors were then to be blamed for the apparent disorder.

One may also wonder whether the description is unsystematic not because of the nature of hell, but because of the nature of communication and memory. If it were to proceed systematically, would the text then not lose elements of surprise, of criss-crossing expectations, of unexpected turns that help to sustain attention? It must be kept in mind that this book was apparently meant for popular consumption and not written to satisfy the needs of theologians.

Moreover, one may ask whether an arrangement that proceeded, say, from the most heinous sins to the most trifling (or vice versa), or which classified sins according to social relationships and ontological categories (sins towards relatives, business partners, men, nature, etc.), would correspond to the world of experience, where one has the opportunity to commit sins of various degrees all the time.

Last but not least, it was possibly the intention of the text to show that one has to pay attention to sins of all kinds and to encourage the formation of what one might call a total ethical *habitus*. The text may well witness a mentality that does not at all share the idea that one can disregard minor offences. Conquering Ahreman will not be possible unless each and every little sin is avoided.

10. *Hell in Miniatures*

The *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* was probably the most successful Pahlavi book in terms of literary diffusion (witness the various translations of the work). Apart from textual transmission, the work was also translated into visual culture. In Mogul India, miniatures were painted that illustrated Persian or Gujarati translations of the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*.⁴⁰ The scenes of hell were of course easy to visualize for the artists. In this way, the text also reached illiterate people. Dhanjibhai Nauroji, the first modern Zoroastrian convert to Christianity, who would later himself become a Christian missionary, tells the following episode in his autobiography *From Zoroaster to Christ*:

I saw a Parsi lady of my acquaintance reading a book, and asked her what it was she was reading. She told me it was Ardawirafnama. . . . It has several pictures, and the lady showed me one of them. A frightful one it was! A man was hanging in a tree, with his legs tied together, his feet upwards, and his head downwards. Serpents and scorpions were all over his body, and devils with tails were all around. I asked the lady what it meant, and she said it was a picture of the punishment which a man was receiving in hell, who had been a great sinner while on earth. I fled from her and became violently agitated in mind. Why had I been allowed to see that picture? (Nauroji 1909:24–25)

This report is part of a biographical reconstruction explaining his increasing dissatisfaction with Zoroastrianism in his youth — a typical feature of conversion narratives. As such, the episode is part of a narrative scheme that contrasts the barbaric character of his former religion with the paternal benevolence of his adopted one. Nevertheless, the episode vividly illustrates the power of these sorts of pictures in making a lasting emotional impression on memory. As such, these miniatures may have fulfilled an important function.

III. The Erosion of Hell in Contemporary Zoroastrianism?

The quote from Dhanjibhai Nauroji has brought us to the modern age. Restrictions of time and space do not allow us at this point to follow up

⁴⁰) For some specimens see Blochet 1899; Desai 1991; Gropp 1993 (some reproduced in Stausberg 2002a); Choksy 2002.

on the development of Zoroastrian conceptualizations of hell in Persian and Gujarati Zoroastrian literatures. Instead, we will now make a long jump of another millennium (from the date of the literary composition of most Pahlavi works) and conclude this article with some comments on the present age.

Some ten years ago, Philip Kreyenbroek conducted a study among the Zoroastrian (Parsi) community in India based on thirty in-depth-interviews of urban Zoroastrians from Mumbai belonging to different social milieus and religious groups (but overwhelmingly lay-people). One of his results was that compared to classical texts, hell had apparently ceased to preoccupy the minds of people: “none of our informants indicated that they were afraid of going to hell” (Kreyenbroek 2001:299). He links this finding to a general attitude averse to dualistic thinking, which is openly rejected by some.

From my reading of contemporary Zoroastrian theological literature, I am under the impression that hell is not a prominent topic in the contemporary literature written by Zoroastrians on their religion, although many duly mention it as part of their theological legacy. However, some modern theologians such as Dastur Bode or the neo-Zarathushtrian “convert” Ali Akbar Jafarey exhibit the tendency to interpret heaven and hell as subjective states rather than as objective places or as inner-worldly rather than as otherworldly domains (see Stausberg 2002b:139, 369).

Besides such qualitative data, John Hinnells has provided us with quantitative data from a survey conducted in Britain, Hong Kong, North America (USA and Canada), Australia, and Kenya in the period 1983–1987. The total numbers for belief in “heaven and hell” (thus not specifically hell!) varies from 31% (Canada) to 77% (Kenya). With the exception of Hong Kong (33%) and Sydney (38%) on the one extreme and Karachi (71%)⁴¹ on the other, most countries and cities were in the 45 to 54% range. The figures for “heaven and hell” are consistently and significantly lower than the figures for “belief in immortality of soul”; at the same time they score consistently higher than the figures for both “reincarnation” and “resurrection” (see Hinnells 1994:99). Due to the lack of previous documentation it is impossible to decide whether these

⁴¹) Hinnells (1994:66) advises that “[t]he figures for Karachi should be treated with caution,” since the questionnaire was part of a pilot study.

figures amount to evidence for continuity or decline of beliefs in hell, but the figures are certainly higher than one would have expected based on Kreyenbroek's statement (unless one believes in either a radical decline in the decade separating Hinnells' from Kreyenbroek's study or in India being totally exceptional with regard to the spread of these beliefs).

The survey data provided by Hinnells allow for some further comments.⁴² Thus, there are clear distinctions when one takes the countries of origin of the diaspora-Zoroastrians into account: only 30% of those already settled in the West and only 36% of those from an Iranian background affirmed a belief in heaven and hell, whereas the scores for people originating from India (48%), Pakistan (66%), and East Africa (54%) were much higher. Among those coming from India, significantly more Zoroastrians from Gujarat (60%) asserted belief in heaven and hell than people from Mumbai (46%).⁴³ Significantly more people married to Zoroastrians affirmed the belief (50%) than those married to non-Zoroastrians (41%).

In general, a higher number of those who had attended religious classes in childhood expressed such a belief (52%) than of those who had not (45%). These figures may mirror the effects of religious education, or co-vary with other factors. A higher number of those who read Zoroastrian (religious) literature (52%) expressed belief in heaven and hell than of those who did not read Zoroastrian literature (45%). A significant higher number of those who regularly attended a Zoroastrian Centre (i.e. a community infrastructure in the diaspora) affirmed this belief (52%) than of those who attended infrequently (33%). Higher education slightly correlated with lower scores (46% of those who had done postgraduate studies expressed this belief against 51% with lower degrees of education). Zoroastrians having a degree in sciences were less likely to affirm this belief than those who had degree in the arts (45% as against 54%). More business people (49%) asserted this belief than professionals (42%).

Among age groups, the belief was least asserted by people in their 20s (40%), while those in their 60s (57%) scored highest, but these figures

⁴² For all the figures quoted in the following see Hinnells 2005:758–83.

⁴³ These figures also correlate to the figures for the languages in which people read: Persian (35%), English (43%), Gujarati (57%); see Hinnells 2005:763.

should not be over-interpreted, given the scores for the adjoining age groups (under 20s: 46%; 70+: 49%). Types of families, however, did not yield significant differences (nuclear: 45%; extended: 49%; no family: 49%), nor did having children correlate (with children: 48%; no children: 46%). The belief was more pronounced among those who were widowed (55%) and less among those who were separated or divorced (41%) than among either singles or married people (48% each). In general, slightly more females than males seemed to believe in heaven and hell (51% against 45%).

These data show that the belief in heaven and hell is shared by around half of the worldwide Zoroastrian diaspora population, with some significant differences. The belief is affirmed particularly by women, people who have married Zoroastrians, business people, people with a degree in the arts, or relatively little education, by people from East Africa, Pakistan and India, especially from rural backgrounds, and by people who frequently visit a Zoroastrian Centre, read Zoroastrian literature and who attended religious classes in childhood. All these correlations say nothing about co-variation and causalities. To take just one example: does being married to a Zoroastrian make a person likely to hold this belief, or does one avoid marrying non-Zoroastrians because one is afraid of hell, or is this only a case of co-variation? Similarly: what is the causal significance, if any, of professional, educational, and geographical background? The clear distribution by country, however, makes it likely that hell plays a different role in the Zoroastrian discursive communities and world-views in different countries.

Given that the diaspora (contrary to India and partly also to Iran) does not have a full-time professional priesthood, Hinnells' figures do not cover the priesthood (even if the dataset may include some Zoroastrians who were trained as priests) and his demographic variables do not include information on possible priestly backgrounds. Kreyenbroek's later study explicitly focused on the urban laity. Since the priests are the backbone of the normative tradition as propagated in the sources discussed above — in fact all the Middle Persian texts referred to above were probably composed by priests — we need to look at the attitudes of contemporary Zoroastrian priests.

In 2006 and 2007 the present writer (assisted by Dr. Ramiyar Karanjia, Benaifer Wykes, and Meher Patel) conducted a comprehensive survey

of the contemporary Zoroastrian priesthood in Western India.⁴⁴ The main dataset of this survey were structured interviews with some 50 practicing full-time professional priests. As part of the interview we asked a series of questions on the priests' beliefs. One of the questions was whether they believed in heaven and hell. 42 priests answered this question, among whom 4 priests stated that they did *not* believe in heaven and hell. One of them (aged 51) said: "Everything is here only." Furthermore, one priest expressed an agnostic attitude, stating: "We find out when we go there." Nine priests affirmed their belief, but with the important qualification that heaven and hell were considered this-worldly phenomena,⁴⁵ some making a connection to the concept of *karma*. One priest (76)⁴⁶ regarded heaven and hell as constructions of the mind ("it can make heaven of hell and hell of heaven"). One priest (57), who held a degree in Avesta and Pahlavi, pointed to the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg*, which he described as an "allegorical" description of the other world,⁴⁷ while another priest, aged 63, referred to the bridge leading to the other world (from which the souls fall into hell) as "mythological." Thus, there are very few priests who explicitly reject a belief in heaven and hell, but there are several priests who add qualifying statements to a general affirmation of this belief. The great majority of priests, however, either simply replied in the affirmative or even asserted this belief in an emphatic manner.⁴⁸ Some also added brief statements.⁴⁹ And at least one priest (73) expressed the confidence that

⁴⁴ The priesthood in Iran has changed dramatically after World War II. The professional heritable full-time professional priesthood has in practice been abolished; see Stausberg 2004:110–13.

⁴⁵ Here are some responses: "Everything is here"; "Whatever is there you suffer here only"; "Yes, it is there but it is in this world only"; "It exists on this world only"; "If you have misbehaved and done something bad, later on in your life, you or your kids will have to suffer"; "...at times I feel that we get rewarded for our good and bad deeds in this lifetime only. So we have heaven and hell here only. But there must be something that is why we have rituals and ceremonies." The latter statement refers to the fact that the priests primarily perform rituals.

⁴⁶ The numbers in brackets refer to the age of the respondents.

⁴⁷ Some other respondents also referred to this text.

⁴⁸ "All of us go there"; Yes. I believe in it"; "I suppose so"; "I have heard about it so I believe in it"; "Certainly"; "Yes, definitely"; "Obviously it is there"; "Sure."

⁴⁹ "According to Ardaviraf-Nameh, when he leaves the earthly plane, to see what is there; heaven, hell and Hamestagan, where sin and good deeds are equal. When I am

the correct performance of rituals would bring the priests (and their clients) to heaven (“If we perform the rituals properly, we go to heaven”).⁵⁰ It therefore seems that the hypothetical erosion of conceptions of hell — if they ever were as wide-spread in the communities as the normative literature suggests — has so far not affected the priesthood, at least not in India, where those doubting the existence of hell are a minority.

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with Padshah Saheb [= the consecrated fire in the temple], I feel I am in heaven. So there is no question of hell. People say that this is hell. Now in this hell also I am getting heaven. So this hell is nullified” (a priest aged 35); “Heaven hell depends on your deed. Heaven is your good deeds and hell is your bad deed. There are seven dakhys [= spheres]. After death, you are assigned a plane and place depending on your actions” (a priest aged 44).

⁵⁰ See Stausberg, Forthcoming, for the priests’ views on their rituals, their efficacy, and the relation of these views to matters of professional ethics.

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